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ABSTRACT

This examination of the issue of intellectual freedom in academic libraries provides examples of recent controversies, and argues that the library's response to such controversies provides an opportunity to emphasize its educational role. It is noted that academic libraries are full of controversial materials, and that this is necessary if the library is to be able to make information available that presents more than one point of view on issues. On controversial issues in society, it is argued, access to information on both sides of an issue should be the rule and not the exception. Balance should be the guiding principle in library collection development, and it is suggested that representing both sides of controversial issues in a collection is a powerful rationale for the library's educational role on campus. It is concluded that the library should not be a reactionary presence when controversy arises, but a proactive and educating part of the education community. (EW)

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CONTROVERSIES, COLLECTIONS, AND THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY'S EDUCATIONAL ROLE

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Most of us are prepared to address any intellectual freedom issue, just as Doonesbury's Zonker Harris is prepared to write any term paper. We will use much of the same rationale and many of the same clichés regardless of the issue, whether it is race, religion, sex, or creed. We will take comfort in Jefferson's dictum on free speech, "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

This is one of the things they really did teach us in library school. Intellectual freedom is very important to us as academic librarians. The American Library Association maintains an office and several staff members for this single issue. I had occasion recently to call on that office and they responded with no less than ten separate pamphlets on aspects of intellectual freedom and controversies librarians are likely to encounter.

Tenure for academic librarians is partially based on the need for us to be free of ideological pressures in securing the materials necessary to an intellectual environment. Seldom do we examine our holdings or acquisitions to determine if they might offend anyone. We are usually secure in the principals of academic and intellectual freedom.

This is not to say the issues that give rise to challenges to intellectual freedom are dead or even dormant. In the spring of 1987,

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prior to a speech at Northern Illinois University by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, racist epithets were shouted at black students on campus by white students "cruising" in a car. The reactions against this behavior were instantaneous and vocal by both black and white students, faculty, and administrators.

Picked up by the media and coupled with race incidents on several campuses, the NIU incident sensitized students, faculty, and administrators to the continuing problem of racism on campuses throughout the nation. The library joined other colleges in a schedule of programs during a "Unity Through Diversity" week intended to celebrate the diverse racial makeup of the campus. Our contribution was an exhibit in the lobby of the main library.

In early September, 1987, a racist newspaper, The Thunderbolt, published in Marietta, Georgia, and various other places by the National States Rights Party for at least the last twenty-five years, was mailed to fraternities at NIU on a random basis. That helped prompt the Chicago Tribune article titled, "NIU Again Plagued by Racial Incidents." The Vice-President for Student Affairs urged the newspaper be discarded when found. The NIU President and local newspapers quickly condemned the paper and everything for which it stood. Then, perhaps inevitably, The Thunderbolt was found on the libraries' periodical shelves. You see, we subscribe to it! We have subscribed to it for the last twenty years!

Reactions to this revelation took on an ominous tone. The student who serves as minority relations advisor to the Student Senate DEMANDED "on behalf of the student body" that Thunderbolt be cancelled and all past issues be removed from library shelves.

The library responded in true library fashion by putting Thunderbolt behind the desk for checkout AND referring the issue to a committee for review. There it remained for three months while pros and cons of censorship were aired in the newspapers. During that time, a number of us reviewed the intellectual freedom pamphlets as well as our public and private stands on the topic. Oh, yes, several of us on campus received several pages of particularly offensive "hate mail." Mine began, "We are a group of white gentile males..." Now THAT stuff will help you make up your mind quickly about what is racist trash!

The library is probably correct in protecting the material and referring it to a collection development advisory committee. What is not right is that racism, religion, geopolitics, sex, monetary and moral issues are present on our campuses with the library unprepared to respond proactively about its collections when incidents occur. Such incidents can draw rapid and unfavorable attention to objectionable materials in the library.

A few examples from the area will perhaps cause each of you to recall how libraries responded or did not respond:

Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain, is the object of a continuing complaint that it portrays blacks in a derogatory way and is therefore inappropriate for young readers.

Gay students' lives are threatened and their publication destroyed.

Swastikas deface a holocaust memorial.

Books published about the Molluccan islands are defecated upon in a library restroom.

Playboy publishes a nude photo series featuring a quadriplegic. Commentary by the Chicago Tribune features complaints by female employees at the magazine.

A campus newspaper reports that the library is not buying books because it has run out of money.

Stumpf, a self-styled "satirical" publication, is issued and distributed by students. It features poetry such as "White Power" and "The AIDS Song" which is racist, sexist, and homophobic.

All of these incidents occurred on Illinois campuses and in Illinois communities in the past year. All of them involved the library directly or indirectly through its collections. How should the library deal with these incidents? Is there a compelling reason for the library to respond at all?

I maintain that there is a compelling reason for the academic library to respond actively to racist and other incidents on the campus. It is contained in the educational role of the library as it is present in every component of a college; not only in the teaching component. There resides in the library's mission such an educational role. Further, librarians must understand and respond to the relationship between controversial incidents, library collections intellectual freedom, and the library's educational role on campus.

Academic libraries are full of highly controversial materials. Racist materials are well represented both in historical collections and in current acquisitions such as South African government publications.

Controversial religious publications damning sinners of every other religion are not uncommon. Religious Islamic states both condemn and are condemned in the international media. Christianity and Judaism are regularly attacked in Eastern European Communist media. Does the library receive ba'hai publications?

The geopolitical sphere splits and re-forms constantly. Human rights violations abound. "Freedom movements" or "separatist uprisings" coexist

within the same revolution (depending on your point of view) in Indonesia, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, the Philippines, and many other places. Does the library get the pro-government newspaper or the opposition daily?

Matters of sexual conduct and exploitation are almost clichés. The playboy philosophy has given way to the AIDS debate, laws attempting to define pornography, and spouse rape. Does the library receive Playgirl?

Money is an "out" topic right now. I include it, however, for the simple reason that money and its use frequently becomes highly controversial. Historically, capital - its creation and use to exploit - has been an extremely powerful cause of controversy. Does the Library have a current copy of the athletic department's budget?

Materials dealing with moral conduct are frequently objectionable. Homosexuality, slavery, abortion, pornography, torture, and rape are topics which incite strong feelings. All occur in our society and our world and all are represented in the materials in our libraries. After we have defended their presence with the intellectual freedom arguments, how do we explain their presence?

The first explanation many of us give is probably a defensive or even self-righteous one. "We get it for research purposes," may be the answer. I suggest that "educational purposes" is more accurate. The academic library collects materials which serve to educate people on issues. Research is certainly necessary as is browsing and curiosity about the topic. Examining both sides of an issue is the nature of good research, but is not always present in education. On controversial issues in society, however, access to information on both sides of an issue should be the rule rather than the exception.

Balance is, therefore, a guiding principal in collection development in the library. Justification and apologia are balanced by condemnation and reformation; pros by cons. Representing both sides of controversial issues in the collections is a powerful rational for the library's educational role on campus.

When controversy is present; when incidents occur; when issues arise; the academic library should be one of the first on campus to respond. Patrons who are angry and upset will frequently direct their anger at institutions and materials which symbolize the cause of their anger. If the library is to educate, patrons must perceive the library as part of their educational process; fair and unprejudiced.

The campus newspaper in February blared, "Thunderbolt to Remain in Library." The committee had spoken and Thunderbolt was declared to be necessary to the research mission of the University Libraries. We missed a real opportunity then and we continue in our failure to actively address controversies on campus. It is not a failure which is highly visible to the public, but it is a telling one for librarians. The library should not be a reactionary presence on campus. It can and should respond proactively to educate as part of an educational community.